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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

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Abstract

The responsibilities of a principal are limitless; ranging from teacher evaluations to student discipline and from building maintenance to school budgets. A principal is not only responsible for his/her own actions, but is responsible and held accountable for the conduct of all teachers, support staff and maintenance personnel that are under his/her supervision. School administration must be one of the most challenging careers that one can persue [sic]. Presently the occupation of a school principal is moving through a transformational period based on research that advocates a style of leadership that better suits and can better serve the complex, everchanging students, teachers and schools. I will attempt to highlight what perceive to be the most crucial components of being an effective principal. These are responsibility of schools, school based management and evaluation/instructional leadership. Undoubtedly, I will fail to 2 mention many of the roles and responsibilities of a principal, for to mention all of them would be impossible.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTRARY SCHOOL:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Rodney D. Earleywine

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The responsibilities of a principal are limitless; ranging from teacher evaluations to student discipline and from building maintenance to school budgets. A principal is not only responsible for his/her own actions, but is responsible and held accountable for the conduct of all teachers, support staff and maintenance personnel that are under his/her supervision.

School administration must be one of the most challenging careers that one can persue. Presently the occupation of a school principal is moving through a transformational period based on research that advocates a style of leadership that better suits and can better serve the complex, everchanging students, teachers and schools.

I will attempt to highlight what I perceive to be the most crucial components of being an effective principal. These are responsibility of schools, school based management and evaluation/instructional leadership. Undoubtedly, I will fail to

mention many of the roles and responsibilities of a principal, for to mention all of them would be impossible.

Responsibilities of Schools

When children begin school some of the parental responsibilities are shifted from the parents to the school. The responsibility of educating our youth is the most obvious obligation that is passed from the parents to the schools. Many other areas of extreme importance have also become the schools responsibility. Among these are nutrition, physical fitness, discipline, personal hygiene as well as social and moral development. Our schools are being asked to do more and more with less resources available.

The role of educational institutions is everchanging and must make every effort to keep pace with societal changes that face our children. Societal problems include broken homes, single parents, both parents working, substance abuse, long hours at day care, children being left alone at home for

long periods of time, latch key kids or parents simply not living up to their responsibilities. With the amount of time children spend at school, school systems across the United States are becoming more responsible for what were once considered parental duties.

As a prospective principal I feel schools must do everything possible to produce positive and productive citizens, even if that requires more parental responsibility for teachers and schools. "Teachers are a parent substitute, an imparter of values and a contributor to a child's self esteem" (Papalia & Olds, 1990, p.440). We are compelled as professional educators to do everything possible to honor our obligations. Even with unlimited effort and resources, it is impossible for our school systems to assume and fulfill all of our children's needs.

School Based Management

School Based Management (SBM) is a relatively new concept that is becoming popular in the management of instructional institutions. Whether referred to as shared decision making, site-based management, school based management, school based leadership, school councils or collegial teams, the concept is basically the same. The idea is simple; let the stakeholders and the people closest to the situation help in finding solutions to the problems (Heller, 1993; Lange,1993).

The redistribution and perception of power has caused many school administrators to balk at the thought of shared decision making. The perception of power plays an important role in shared decision making. As a principal I must be willing to empower teachers and other stakeholders by asking for their honest input and respecting responses that differ from my own. Professional educators along with other members of the school community must agree to disagree,

collaborate and reach consensus on the best solution for the particular problem or item being discussed.

Advocates of shared decision making believe that it offers principals the opportunity to be effective administrators. Empowering teachers in the decision making responsibilities develops teacher ownership into the decisions. An effective principal can facilitate the decision making process that seeks the best possible solutions to our common problems and alternatives to the established way of doing business.

SBM helps open the doors of communication between the teachers and the principal. Principals have the opportunity to gain valuable insight and knowledge from several sources. Individual weaknesses can be minimized and strengths shared by involving people with more experience and knowledge in the decision making process (Lange,1993).

The principals' role in shared decision making varies depending on which model is used. The model mandated by the

state of Kentucky had principals serving as the chairperson of

school based councils which were made up of two elected

parents and three elected teachers. The principal had no veto

power over decisions made by the council (Drury,1993). Many

principals are concerned about the direction in which their

profession is headed. If schools are to be run by school based

committees or councils, what will the roles and

responsibilities of the principals be? Supporters of shared

decision making suggest that the principal needs to be a

facilitator which helps others do the work of school

governance. The power of the principalship will be enhanced

because the more power you give away the more power you

have (Lange, 1993; Vann, 1992).

Many principals are beginning to ask the same question.

Will schools of the future need principals? Hill City,

Minnesota has been without a principal in their K-12 school

since 1988 (Drury, 1993). A governing team of seven people;

four teachers, two parents and one non-teaching staff member are making management decisions through consensus.

Some teachers are as reluctant as principals to engage in shared decision making. The time factor is one of their main concerns, teachers find it difficult to schedule time to meet in an already busy day. Others are unwilling to commit to the responsibilities that are inherent in making decisions. They question if administrative responsibility and accountability will be shifted from the principal to the teachers. If wrong decisions are made will this be included in the formal evaluation process?

Relationships between principals and teachers change under most models of shared decision making. Shared decision making tends to bring about trust and confidence between the two groups. Heller (1993) pointed out that the principal's ego must not get in the way of making better decisions. Principals must create an environment which promotes professional

growth. The principal is still in charge, but there is more collaboration and consultation with those who are closest to the issue. Teacher empathy for the complex role of the principal is fostered as principals establish trust in teacher input. Through researching current information on which to base good decisions the staff forms a better understanding of the operation of the school.

Before implementation of a shared decision making model it is essential to outline which decisions will be shared and who will be responsible for the decisions. Areas of authority need to be outlined as to make all participants aware of their particular role (Jones, 1993). Failure to delineate who or which group will make specific decisions can cause problems as groups will constantly crossover into decisions that are the responsibility of others. Are the decisions to be made by the central office, school site or both? Of the decisions that are made at the school site, who will make those decisions at that

site? If the decisions are to be made by committees, how will the committees be formed? Will the committees be made up of teachers or will community members, parents or support staff also be involved in the process?

Inservice and staff development will be needed to assure that everyone understands the process. Merely adopting and distributing a shared decision making model is not enough. Everyone involved must know which decisions they will be involved in and how the decisions will be made. Skills of collaboration and consensus must be developed and nurtured if open dialogue is to be used as the means of making decisions. This will help ensure that autocratic principals are not replaced with autocratic committees.

One of the biggest drawbacks to implementing a model of shared decision making is the time factor. Making decisions through collaboration and consensus is a time consuming process. Coupled with the time necessary to implement the

model at the onset and train everyone involved, some school districts feel that the process is too time consuming.   A school in Maryland gave up on shared decision making (Drury, 1993).   The time factor was the biggest obstacle.   Parents and teachers believed that the process took more time than they could devote.

Opponents of shared decision making point out that some decisions are not conducive to the shared decision making process.   They believe that professional competency and teacher evaluations must be left to the administration. Supporters conclude that decisions pertaining to curriculum, grading, discipline and budgeting are very receptive to shared decision making.

The central office also plays a major role in the process of shared decision making. The central office can serve as consultants for the people making decisions at the school sites (Lange, 1993).   By demonstrating support for shared decision

making through modeling and encouragement, the central office can confirm its commitment to the process. Mandating shared decision making without practicing the process within the central office will surely bring about skepticism. However, the central office must make sure that all decisions are consistent with board policy.

Shared decision making is not an event but a process that should be implemented only after careful consideration of the complexities of the process. Jumping into this action without preparation will surely lead to failure. The benefits of shared decision making lie in the assumptions that better decisions concerning our children's education can be made by the people that are the closest to the children.

SBM has the potential to create great changes within our schools. Teachers must be the catalyst of this change. Little change takes place in a school until someone discusses the concerns of teachers (Ornstein, 1993). As other resources

have dwindled, one of the most valuable assets, the teachers, are now being utilized. This resource has long been viewed as lacking knowledge and or ability to make important decisions. Tapping this resource can fuel our educational systems and breathe new life into our schools. As a principal I will have to develop immanginative ways to involve teachers that have never been asked, " what do you think? "

There are three areas of the school community that I would like to discuss as they relate to my beliefs and how SBM can play an important role in each. These areas are vision, curriculum, and budgeting.

Vision

If the vision is to be a shared vision that is widely supported throughout the school community. Then, development must be a joint effort of committee members who are made up of administrators, teachers, students, parents, community members and a school board member.

Establishing a shared vision through open dialogue and consensus is one of the most critical components of establishing commitment to a shared decision making model. A common vision provides consistency and a sense of direction for everyone to focus upon. This shared vision lets everyone know where the school is headed and provides for a common goal. The vision must be based upon the values, beliefs and culture of the school community being served.

One of the first steps in establishing a clear vision for the school community is to develop a school community profile. This profile can serve as a data base against which school site decisions can be made and evaluated (Lange, 1993). It is imperative for the profile to accurately reflect the present status of the school. We must establish where we presently stand if we are to develop a strategy that will get us to where we want to be. A realistic profile will enable us to develop an effective plan of improvement. A school community profile

will bring about needed discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of our school. Barth (1990) stressed the importance of forming a vision of not what is, but what might be.

The next step in the development of a shared vision is committee members sharing common beliefs that are shared throughout the school community. The beliefs are then refined into a mission statement that serves as the focus of what we do in our schools. The beliefs and mission statement provide direction in making decisions which affect our schools. The mission statement must be visionary. Everyone associated with the school community should work toward fulfilling the mission statement.

As a principal I may be asked to facilitate the process of writing a mission statement. If one was not in place I would strongly support my school taking the necessary time to do so. If they are in place, they need to be reviewed, assessed and

updated on an annual basis.

Effective leaders establish stategies that align the needs and values of individual groups with the mission and goals of the organization. Good leaders allow the stakeholders to participate in the decision making process (Ornstein,1993). By developing and implementing a plan, the gap between present reality and what is desired can be closed. The plan must be constantly assessed and modified in such a way as to not lose sight of the shared vision.

Curriculum

The development of curriculum is very conducive to the benefits of SBM. Curriculum development should be a bottom up procedure that is best served by bringing together a wide range of viewpoints, ideas and suggestions. Parent, community, teacher(s) and administrative involvement are all key ingredients to the success of schools. Curriculum that addresses current needs and future problems must be

established.

Public involvement in the process may include a needs assessment questionnaire as well as the organizing of district wide committees which will bring the public and educators together. These committees will help ensure that we receive the insight from the public that is needed.

A second essential component to the development of curriculum is organizing teachers into committees. Core committees would be responsible for the actual writing or modification of the curriculum for the subject at hand. On site committees would be responsible for making suggestions about possible changes to the present curriculum. It is imperative that everyone know and understand the curriculum process. Inservice and follow-up sessions will be necessary to ensure staff competence.

The teachers who are giving instruction must be involved in the development process if the process is to be successful.

The bottom-up approach encourages a sense of ownership among the teachers (Ornstein, 1993). Teacher ownership is developed and enhanced when they are involved in the process. It is the professional responsibility of the teachers to ensure that curriculum that was developed through collaboration and based on research is being taught. Educators need to follow established curriculum, not just teach favorite material.

As a principal I will be involved in the curriculum process but cannot dictate the procedure. I see my role as that of a facilitator, helping others fully understand the process, keeping the staff informed of state standards and mandates that may affect present curriculum or require implementation of new curricula. Staffing, space and scheduling are areas in which a principal can be of particular assistance.

Principals cannot be expected to be experts in all areas of the curriculum. The role of the principal is to supervise the curriculum. It is the principal's responsibility to hold

teachers accountable for following the curriculum. This can be accomplished by reviewing teacher lesson plans followed by class visitations.

Budgeting

The budgeting process is another aspect of school management that is receptive to SBM. As with other arenas managed by shared decision making the process is best served and most effective when community members, parents, students, teachers, support staff and administrators are involved in the process. A district wide committee consisting of representatives from those components would be responsible for developing a district budget for the following school year.

Sub-committees at the building site develop budget packages within the individual school. Individual teachers would all be involved in developing budgets within their departments or grade level. These sub-committees turn in

want lists including current price lists of all desired items. These lists are then narrowed to need lists or items deemed absolutely necessary.

When my school actively practiced this process many wonderful ideas for sharing equipment, supplies and materials were created through the process of teacher collaboration. Not everyone received everything they desired, but most of the people felt good about the process. Reducing the want lists to need lists was not as difficult as was expected when teachers began to brainstorm money saving ideas.

What is the principals role in the budget process? Principals must be involved in budget development but as with curriculum he/she cannot dominate or dictate decisions that are made. The principal has the responsibility to keep expenditures within the budget that is developed. To do this all purchases that are made for the school must go through the principal's office. This will ensure that purchases are planned

and within the established perimeters of spending.

Teacher Evaluation

As a principal, I will have the responsibility of supervising and evaluating staff members. The process must be thoroughly and completely understood by everyone. Establishment of a non-threatening environment is critical if the evaluation process is to be successful. Teacher input into the evaluation process will help establish teacher ownership and trust in the system.

The main purpose of teacher evaluation is for the improvement of instruction. Growth and improvement for teachers is necessary if our students are to receive the best education that my staff can offer. If I am to be an effective instructional leader, my staff and I must establish and implement, a process which creates and promotes a quality learning environment for students, staff and myself. Barth (1990) referred to this as a community of learners.

It is my view that everyone has room for improvement. "Even the best teachers can benefit from assistance, even if assistance merely provides grounded assurance that they are doing a good job" (Andrews & Smith, 1987). Experienced teachers that have been in the business for twenty or more years have areas that can be improved.

Incompetent teachers can be devastating to the future of our students if steps are not taken to remedy these teachers. When I recognize that a teacher is not performing at a desired level, it will be my responsibility to assist in the improvement of the situation. First, the specific area of deficiency must be defined. What is the base of the problem? Can the problem be remedied? These questions need to be answered through open and honest dialogue between the staff member and the principal. If the problem can be solved a plan of assistance must be established and implemented, detailing what will be done and when it will be done.

If an improvement plan is not successful, the principal has to make a decision. Is the observed deficiency adversely affecting our students ability to learn? If the answer to this question is yes, the principal has no other choice than to recommend termination of the teacher. Following due process and proper documentation of the entire situation is critical. Before this stage, I would do all that was possible to counsel the teacher out of education. I have observed principals that offer good recommendations to poor teachers if they will resign. This is an outrage and an injustice to the teaching profession.

The most important role of an instructional leader is to ensure that our students are receiving appropriate instruction. Promoting professional development by facilitating a professional growth plan based on open dialogue and self assessment can help improve teacher effectiveness. Principals can no longer sit behind their desks waiting for

problems to come their way. Principals must be actively involved in the education of the students, recognizing potential problems and then acting upon them. Walking through the halls without ever entering the classrooms is a practice that must stop.

Strong instructional leaders work hard at improving instructional activities for students. This can be accomplished if an effective evaluation process which is based on professional growth is developed. This is not accomplished by going into the classrooms and telling the teachers how to do their job. It is achieved by providing conditions where everyone has the opportunity to be successful. Instructional leaders do not lead through manipulation of power, they lead by modeling commitment and dedication.

If research and practice support the role of a principal to be an instructional leader, why are principals being trained to become managers rather than instructional leaders? "Most

educational administration programs train principals to be managers of the school, not visionary, transformational leaders" (Leithwood, 1992). My educational experiences through the University of Northern Iowa have strongly advocated the role of a principal be that of an instructional leader. If schools are truly going to transform to assure learning for all, the principal must be at the forefront of this process.

Conclusion

It is an exciting time to become involved in educational administration. I believe that we are on the verge of making effective, wide scale changes in the field of education. These changes will lead yet to more advances that will help dictate our path to the future.

The recent swing from centralization to decentralization of decision making for schools and the move toward school based management places even more responsibility on the

principal. These responsibilities are not the same responsibilities of the past, but are new responsibilities that require true leadership skills.

Transformation of our schools will not be done overnight or without criticism from special interest groups. If schools are to meet the challenges which lay ahead, everyone involved will need to accept new roles and responsibilities. Change is necessary, but can be uncomfortable and at times stressful. Principals must provide time, effort, dedication and instructional leadership to help create schools that meet our students needs and help prepare them for their future. I am looking forward to the opportunities and challenges as I prepare for my future in educational administration.

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